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## **Public Perceptions and Issues for Lincoln Urban Development Department's 2005 Consolidated Plan**

**From the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 24, Part 91, Subpart A,  
Section 91.1(a)(1).**

"The overall goal of the community and development programs covered by this part is to develop viable urban communities by providing decent housing and a suitable living environment and expanding economic opportunities principally for low- and moderate-income persons. The primary means towards this end is to strengthen partnerships among all levels of government and the private sector, including for-profit and non-profit organizations, in the production and operation of affordable housing."

### **The Vision:**

*"In the future, the buildings should be colorful like the people in our neighborhood. Imagine the buildings all colored yellow, black, brown, pink, orange and purple. The world would look like a rainbow. I care because the people in the neighborhood would look like the buildings. To look new and wonderful, just like us!"*

- Marinah Stearns, 4<sup>th</sup> Grade  
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## Section I: Introduction to this Report

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Communities constantly reinvent themselves. Whether that process is one of improvement or decay depends directly upon the commitment that the citizens have to each other, their dwellings, their neighborhoods, and their town or city as a whole.

Lincoln, Nebraska is fortunate to be a city full of citizens who care deeply about its future: not only those who think and talk about public policy, but also those who actually roll up their sleeves to do the “nitty gritty” hands on work that makes a project succeed.

Lincoln’s Urban Development Department (UDD) has had a significant role in providing both funding and organizational structures needed to help its citizens succeed in their improvement efforts.

Therefore, as the UDD has begun the process of developing a new Consolidated Plan for 2005 through 2010, it has been a natural extension of this collaborative philosophy for the Department to incorporate broad citizen engagement into the initial stages of the Consolidated Plan process.

### The Public Involvement Process

It is easy to talk about public involvement; more difficult to conduct it in a meaningful way so that citizen input has a genuine impact on ultimate policy decisions. Participants in this process were acutely aware of its purpose and potential impact, as shown below:

- *This process has gotten off on the right foot – being as inclusive as possible. Just be sure that the process doesn’t take too long.*
- *This is a very interesting process. However, I would like to wait for the final 2005-2009 Consolidated Plan to see the value of this input.*

Fortunately, Lincoln’s Urban Development Department is committed to and skilled at gleaning and using broad-based citizen engagement in nearly all of its work. For this Consolidated Plan, they have chosen five components to the process:

1. Focus groups made of specific stakeholder clusters;
2. One-on-one interviews with key stakeholders;
3. Kids and Cameras, a project to learn about the opinions and wishes of groups of elementary and middle school children from low and moderate income neighborhoods; and
4. A scientific survey of 1,000 residents of low and moderate-income neighborhoods.

Karen Amen Jensen of Olsson Associates in Lincoln coordinated the first three components. The fifth was conducted by Gallup Research Center at the University of Nebraska. This report presents the results of the Olsson Associates work.

### The Intent and Format of This Report

The power of a public input process lies in the words and pictures of the people who were asked to give their opinions and advice. It would do these people a disservice to try to briefly paraphrase all that they said. Therefore, much of the body of this report is made up of direct quotes from the respondents.

At the same time, no reader would want to wade through pages and pages of unedited and unorganized lists of all the various quotes and comments. Therefore, quotes are often shortened and redundancies not always included.

Even so, this is a long document, and might be daunting to the reader. However, it is Jensen's intent to make this as engaging and easily understood as possible, offering the reader the option to just skim over the main points or read the document in more depth.

Therefore, the format of the report includes these approaches:

1. Headings for each of the major segments of a section

**Are in shaded boxes like this.**

2. Key points, including broad concepts and ideas within each major segment . . .

► . . . are designated with this "►" symbol and are in bold.

NOTE: There is a narrative flow from one bolded key point to the next so that the reader can choose to scan only these and still understand the main ideas.

3. Direct quotes from interviewees and focus group participations illustrate these key points in a more specific way.

- *These quotations are bulleted and italicized, like this.*

NOTE: Each bulleted quote under any given key point is from a different respondent. In general, the more quotations under a topic, the more people there were who mentioned that idea.

## Section II: Executive Summary

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### Most Common Themes and Issues

These are the topics that were most frequently mentioned throughout the public input process. Although the list is not quantified in any way, it reflects the consultant's sense of the items that were most prominently on people's minds during the fall of 2005.

► **Both the rental and housing markets are softening.**

- Take advantage of the opportunities by:
  1. Deconverting rental property into owner-occupied housing,
  2. Helping developers who are "ready to go." (But, where are the lots??)
- Beware of the threats, such as:
  1. Landlords allowing their property to decline,
  2. Loss of jobs in housing-related fields, and

► **Nevertheless, Lincoln still does not have enough affordable housing.**

► **To address homelessness, prevention first!**

- For "single event" homeless, keep them from getting evicted
- For chronic homeless, provide support services
- Kudo's for the Continuum!

► **Then, get homeless people into good housing, and help to keep them there.**

- Good job opportunities essential: in neighborhoods? Yes!
- As are extensive support services for learning homeowner and renter skills.

► **Aesthetics are important: Beautify the neighborhoods and City**

► **For the neighborhoods themselves, Focus on the Foci!**

- Choose specific areas and neighborhoods to focus on at any given time.
- Continue the close working relationships with neighborhoods.

► **How does Antelope Valley fit in with Urban Development priorities?**

► **Leverage, leverage, leverage!**

- Keep on making maximum use of everything you do.

### Summary of Advice for Success of the Plan

When asked to focus on their one most important piece of advice for a successful Plan, the most frequent responses were the following:

► **This Consolidated Plan should “come out smoking” and “connect all the dots” with a big-picture, inspiring vision for the community as a whole.**

- *The Consolidated Plan ought to be out in front, just come out smoking, because it's found out everything that's going on and put it all together.*
- *Make it a little more like the Comprehensive Plan, whose focus is: “This is how we want to be.” Tailor this plan to whatever our community quality of life goals are.*

► **Build greater awareness among citizens and Federal staff of the fact that good things happen as a result of this plan.**

- *Show the Feds what other things are being provided in this community that fit in with their goals; the good things we're doing here to leverage the HUD dollars.*
- *The plan should be more than something that's not widely distributed or read by the general public. Use it to raise consciousness within the community.*

► **Be sure that this public process is well done and that decision-makers pay attention to what is said.**

- *To me, citizen participation means the whole thing, A to Z.*
- *If you're doing this process, you'd better be sure it's because the citizen input will have a real impact on what the Plan ends up with.*

### Summary of Focus Group Results

Each focus group was centered around a specific realm of community work or issues. These were the five different groups.

- |   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| 1. Community Revitalization                   | 4. Housing          |
| 2. Community Services                         | 5. Cultural Centers |
| 3. Bankers, Builders, Realtors and Developers |                     |

Despite the seemingly different composition and focus of each group, there were several issues that arose within nearly every group, as shown below.

► **Changing economic conditions could have a significant impact on housing and its related industries.** Current low interest rates have encouraged home ownership leading to a good opportunity for people who wouldn't traditionally be able to afford to own their own homes. But the housing market is now softening; new

construction is really cooling off. This could lead to several negative impacts. In addition, Lincoln right now is overbuilt in terms of rental properties. This has affected both large apartment complexes and small rentals. Landlords may be less willing to fix up their properties because of decreasing rental income.

► **Nevertheless, encourage landlords to upgrade rental properties . . .** *Landlords can rent out a house in bad condition unless there's a complaint. You see this particularly in the older neighborhoods. Landlords have little incentive to improve rentals. The City doesn't force them to.*

► **. . . using both "carrots" and/or "sticks" to get compliance with codes.** *Put stronger requirements, perhaps even licensing, into the plan and then for enforcement, consider doing it on a complaint basis only.*

► **Take advantage of these conditions to "de-convert" rental property to single-owner-occupied housing.** *The #1 thing you promote in Urban Development is home ownership. Now is a good time to do that. Rental rates right now do not support maintaining older houses as multi-unit rental property.*

► **There are few affordable lots on which to build affordable housing.** *We have developers ready to go, but lot costs put projects for low-income housing out of reach.*

► **The Antelope Valley project will have a major impact on UDD housing priorities.** *I see this project as one of the most important things going on in this community, a tremendous opportunity, a new image for Lincoln. If we end up with only a 'ditch and a road,' it's worth nothing.*

► **Continue the programs that are designed to prevent homelessness.**

- *Once people are evicted from their homes or apartments, it takes a huge amount of money to get them out of the homeless system.*
- *We need different models for the chronically homeless vs. those needing one-time assistance.*

► **Ensure the success of the Continuum of Care initiative.** *The Continuum of Care group has worked hard at developing sustainable programs. We're not duplicating. The HMIS online case management and tracking system has shown that we have 1,032 cases in the system, and only 3% of those were duplicates.*

► **For renters and new homeowners to be successful, job development programs and opportunities are imperative.** *The Moving to Work program at the Housing Authority has been very successful. It's helped people to set goals as an incentive to save money for a down payment for a house. But it appears that HUD doesn't want to fund it anymore.*

► **We need better paying jobs in Lincoln, but be cautious about thinking we can easily create them.** *What kinds of businesses could realistically pay that \$15 - \$30 per hour wage rate we're talking about needing?*

► **For effective economic development, encourage retail revitalization within specific neighborhoods.** *Small retailers are a good example of what can turn a neighborhood around. But only some types of businesses have a good chance of succeeding.*

► **Ensure the sustainability of the cultural centers by genuinely valuing what they bring to the community.** *The trend has been to give the large agencies the funds instead of the cultural centers. We can show very clearly that the people HUD is trying to reach are the people we are working with.*

### Summary of Key Issues from the Interviews

#### Positive perceptions of the Urban Development Department

- *For the last several years, we've had a very proactive Urban Development department. It's been less bureaucratic, less removed from the community*
- *There have been some things underway that have opened up Urban Development, moving it away from being this mystery agency to a place that people can understand.*
- *Urban Development has been very good about asking people's opinions, from the bottom up vs. top down.*

#### Housing: for Both Renters and Homeowners

► **There is limited availability currently of affordable housing:** *Lincoln has tons of places for rent right now, but not enough affordable housing – and that's not just for the homeless.*

- **The Plan must include ways to ensure both well-maintained rental property . . .**
- *What can be done about the properties that are in terrible condition? I know it's expensive for landlords to fix them up, but something needs to be done.*
  - *The City should do housing inspections of the low-income rental units in order to increase the quality of those properties.*

► **. . . and also encourage good, responsible renters by providing a spectrum of support services:** *I wouldn't do a low-income housing project unless lots of other support services were built in.*



► **There can be real challenges for landlords. Give financial assistance to those willing to create and maintain good, low-income rental properties:** *Low-income tax credits are about the only vehicle left for creating affordable rental properties for low-income folks. It's really hard to make deals in this area.*

► **Give special attention to the young adults trying to make it on their own.** *Don't forget about the young adults first transitioning into being independent and who have a hard time finding somewhere to live.*

► **Continue to encourage home ownership.** *We need to maintain our investment in home ownership. There's been a slight slippage in home ownership in Lincoln since the last census, but this may be a reflection of the patterns from the cycle of immigrant populations, where it sometimes takes up to 7 years for them to buy their own homes. But a note of caution: We may be pushing some people into home ownership who may not be ready or capable.*

► **Take advantage of the current economic situation to buy up old properties and then either rehab them for owner-occupied housing or tear them down and start over:** *We've seeing a lot of rentals go up for sale – single family rentals. Wouldn't it be great for the City to buy them and rehab them, and then sell them back to people willing to make the commitment to live long-term in those neighborhoods!*

#### Zoning, Scattered-Site Housing

► **Zoning is where “lots of things begin and end.”**

- *The amount of new land being reserved for multi-family development seems to be declining. There seems to be a movement to rezone this land to commercial. My fear is that after the single-family boom dies down, we won't have enough land for multi-family units.*
- *Lots of things begin and end with zoning, because it drives the quality of life in a community.*

#### Homelessness of All Types

► **Homelessness is a critical issue, one that needs continuing attention.**

*Highlight the homeless group because of the special needs of this population. They can make it, but they often need expensive support services.*

► **The Continuum of Care consortium deserves high praise for its work in this realm.** *This group seems to be working well, getting a lot of information shared, getting things done.*

### Economic Development: Entrepreneurs, Job Training

► **Big picture trends:** *If you look at the Angelou report, you'll see that most of our economic growth will come from ourselves and from new immigrants. I like that, because 30% of the families we work with are new Americans.*

► **We're struggling with the challenge of how to create and sustain good-paying jobs in the community . . .**

- *The families we work with simply don't have good paying jobs. Many local businesses are great about hiring people in the neighborhood, but these are really low-paying jobs.*
- *I guess I'm forced to mouth the same generalities that everyone says, the "not enough good paying jobs" issue. I think I'd really shift resources into job creation.*

► **. . . and then giving our target population the training and support they need in order to enter and stay in the work force.** *Job training is extremely important; the greater capacity people have for earning more money, the better.*

### Antelope Valley Impacts on UDD Programs

► **There is strong support for the project, but continuing concerns about the money needed for it.** *The Antelope Valley and community revitalization programs need to happen, but will they? I don't see any major dollars committed to the neighborhood revitalization part. I'm worried about that.*

### Neighborhood Development and Leadership

► **There has been a continual evolution of the various neighborhood associations and their roles and attitudes:** *The neighborhood associations seem to be extremely strong. The concern is that many neighborhoods feel that new development should pay for itself, that people are thinking: "What can I do to protect my neighborhood?" rather than looking at the big picture as a whole.*

► **Continue the leadership training programs:** *Aren't they [UDD] doing some kind of leadership training for neighborhoods right now? That seems like a good thing.*

## Summary of Kids & Cameras

The children used their cameras to document their answers to four questions about their perceptions of their neighborhoods. The results:

► **The Prettiest Places are those with:**

- Nice landscaping, especially landscaping with water.
- Pleasing architecture; well-maintained homes and buildings

► **The Scariest Places are those with:**

- "Scary people" who gather in particular areas
- Busy streets and heavy traffic
- Dark places

► **The Safest Places are the:**

- Schools
- Police and fire stations
- Churches and homes
- Their own neighborhoods

► **Best Places to Play or Hang Out are:**

- Lincoln city parks
- School playgrounds
- "My house"

► **The children's hopes for the Future**

- *A place for kids to go for fun with their families and grandmothers*
- *Something that we can enjoy looking at that will draw people to the neighborhood.*
- *Use wood from torn down buildings to make tree houses for kids to play in.*
- *A nice environment to support wildlife.*
- *More restaurants and stores in our area so we don't have to drive so far.*

And, finally, the closing words of one young girl's speech:

*"In the future, the buildings should be colorful like the people in our neighborhood. Imagine the buildings all colored yellow, black, brown, pink, orange and purple. The world would look like a rainbow. I care because the people in the neighborhood would look like the buildings. To look new and wonderful, just like us!"*

The adults at the community meeting chose these at their priorities:

1. Better lighting, especially for alleys.
2. Fix up, clean up, maintain and beautify the neighborhoods and parks.
3. More stores, more retail convenient for us and our kids.
4. Safety features for our kids, especially when crossing streets, riding bikes, etc.